

## TUT-POL CASE STUDY

# Los Angeles: Coalition Politics and Transit System Expansion in the Decentralized Region



## Summary

In November 2008, two-thirds of Los Angeles County voters approved “Measure R,” a ballot measure imposing a half-cent sales tax increase for transportation. The measure, which planners estimated would generate \$35–\$40 billion for transit and highway projects over the next 30 years, was noteworthy for several reasons. First, it raised more than twice as much revenue as any other transportation ballot measure passed in the United States since at least 1990. Second, 67.93 percent of the voters supported it, which meant it also passed by a much larger margin than any major U.S. transportation tax question in at least two decades. Third, its success was striking because California has long been a hotbed of voter resistance to higher taxes, at least since 1978 when state voters adopted Proposition 13, which sharply rolled back local property taxes throughout the state, limited future increases, and generally required that new local taxes had to be approved by two-thirds of the voters. Finally, Measure R passed at the county level (with a population of about 10 million) in a famously sprawling and politically fragmented region known for its auto-centric pattern of urban development. The final package, approved by Metro’s board (for submission to the voters) in July 2008, included rail, bus, and highway projects but with a strong transit tilt. While moving forward with the proposed projects, Metro placed another proposition before voters in November 2012, asking them to extend Measure R’s 30-year sunset provision, so as to make

possible a larger amount of borrowing and accelerate the pace of transport improvements. Failing by less than a percentage point, Metro’s leadership, with enthusiastic backing from a coalition of pro-transit supporters who called themselves “Move LA,” approved a follow up ballot measure for November 2016 asking voters to extend the Measure R half-cent sales tax for an additional 18 years (until 2057) and/or to approve a new half-cent sales tax for 40 years.

**This is a story of strong leadership emanating from the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro), which combined strategic planning and public relations campaigns with broad-based coalition building across key sectors of civil society. By joining forces with a transportation-oriented coalition of labor unions, environmental groups, and business organizations who united under the rubric of a single organization (Move LA), Metro leaders and their allies in elected office mobilized enough electoral support to pass Measure R and thus enhance a longer-term regional capacity for urban transport governance even in the face of temporary set-backs.**

## Strategic Actions

**Building on long-term policy conversations among well-organized regional interest groups representing a wide range of diverse constituencies (labor, business, and environmental leaders and organizations) and willing to join with public officials in promoting transit measures.**

The forces uniting behind Move LA initially came together in 2007 to support subway extension along the Wilshire corridor but later embraced a more geographically dispersed set of investments. The coalition then rallied support from political officials, designed the ballot initiative, and peopled the campaign for Measure R, subsequently promoting the two follow-up measures to extend Measure R.

**Assessing who needed to participate in the discussions, when, and in what form—and then engaging these stakeholders in efforts to expand support and narrow opposition.**

While finalizing the ballot proposal, Metro's board and senior staff vetted its content with key constituency groups and made modifications in response to objections. They further solicited citizen feedback through a public relations campaign and met with the editorial boards of the region's newspapers as well as key interest group and opinion leaders. In turn, Mayor Villaraigosa and other political leaders reached out to civic and business leaders to raise over \$4 million for the referendum campaign. Finally, in conjunction with the informational campaign, targeted advertising campaign, and major newspaper endorsements, Move LA members came out in public support of Measure R.

**Framing the definition of the problem so as to generate broader appeal and support.**

The ballot initiative was presented as a regional boon rather than a city-led initiative (the latter implying more exclusive interests and benefits) that combined big and small projects in a concerted approach to traffic relief. Through an "Imagine" public relations campaign, the initiative was also presented as an opportunity for citizens themselves to envision a different future.

**Recruiting and empowering a technical team to package transport knowledge in a politically-savvy manner.**

Under CEO Roger Snoble's leadership (2001–2009), Metro hired a marketing and communications officer and

increased the advertising budget to improve the agency's public image and reputation. In preparation for the ballot referendum, the agency hired a polling expert to help gauge public opinion, time the referendum campaign, and tailor contents of the public relations campaign and measure. Further, it hired a respected Democratic operative to manage an advertising campaign highlighting the arguments that recruited polling consultants had shown to be particularly effective, especially among swing voters.

## Tactical Actions

**Adopting strategic research and planning practices within the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.**

In the early 2000s, in the wake of a major fiscal crisis that caused it to suspend almost all planned projects, Metro's leaders developed a data-focused, revenue-constrained process for developing its Long Range Strategic Plan. In the mid 2000s Metro used this to identify the high-priority projects that it could only afford to build if voters approved transportation-related tax increases.

**Assembling a policy package that took into consideration and accommodated socio-economic and geographic differences across the urban area.**

Measure R designated \$14 billion in investments for new rail projects and enhanced bus corridors, \$8 billion for buses, which carry the bulk of Metro's (largely low income) ridership, and \$8 billion for highway projects, most of them in areas far from central Los Angeles.

**Working at multiple levels of government (local, regional, state) to draft and pass enabling legislation for the ballot initiative, and then additionally applying for and accessing federal funding to accelerate the speed and scope of projects.**

**Timing the referendum to maximize favorable results— during a presidential election expected to generate higher voter turnout, particularly among low income and minority voters, which data from polls and prior referenda projected to be most in favor of the measure.**